7. THE “DARK AGES”: 7TH AND 8TH CENTURY
IN POST-ROMAN DALMATIA II (BECOMING SLAVS)

The different eco-cultural regions of western Illyricum showed the existence of different models of acculturation within the Mediterranean world in pre-Roman and Roman times, so that it is today impossible to believe that late antique Dalmatia was inhabited by a culturally uniform population – ‘Romanised/semi-Romanised Illyrians’ – as they were often referred to in the earlier scholarship. The urbanised and christianised coastal communities were, to a significant degree, included in the global cultural and economical trends of the Mediterranean world, while the identities formed in their rural hinterlands and especially in the mountainous belt in the northern part of the province required different assessments. Despite significant changes which occurred on the coast, such as the dying out of some cities and the appearance of new ones, urbanisation survived there, but disappeared completely in the hinterland. The continuity and disappearance of urban infrastructures caused significant economic, social and spiritual changes, which undoubtedly affected the identities and the ways in which identities were constructed, which resulted in the appearance of ‘Roman’ identities in the surviving Dalmatian cities and ‘Slav’ identities in their hinterland in the 9th century.

Dalmatian cities: Becoming Roman (again)

We saw in chapter 5 that written evidence for the fall of Salona by the invading Slavs and Avars in the first half of the 7th century was very slim. The material evidence has made the entire discourse on the fall of Salona even more doubtful. The lack of material evidence and the continuity of habitation in the Salonitan ager influenced Rapanić, who followed in the footsteps of Vinski’s earlier research, to question the fall of Salona. Archaeology has showed a slow desertion and abandonment of Salona and a continuity of habitation in Diocletian’s palace, which pre-dated the alleged taking of the city by the Avars and Slavs. The view that migration from Salona to the palace occurred throughout a generation or two, rather than suddenly after the alleged ‘sack’ is today
more established in the scholarship.¹ The narrative of the migration of Dalmatian Romani from Epidaurum to Ragusium from the HS reflected the same features as the narrative of the epic resettlement of the Salonitans to Spalatum, via the Dalmatian islands. However, archaeology has also shown a continuity of habitation in the area of modern Dubrovnik in Late Antiquity and a lack of evidence for the sack of Epidaurum in the 7th century.² A similar process of a slow dying out of urban structures, rather than the violent sack of Narona, is clearly shown in the appearance of cemeteries from very Late Antiquity in central urban areas.³ The other cities in Dalmatia also do not appear to have been sacked in this period by any invaders, in particular Iader, and the scholarship is more ready to accept that Dalmatian cities were ‘dying out’, rather than having been sacked and destroyed by the 7th century invaders.⁴ As pointed out earlier in chapter 4, this process was known throughout the late antique world, as cities were not able to maintain urban infrastructures, urban spaces fragmented and lost their functions and transformed into other functions, such as cemeteries, and the cities slowly stagnated. The same process was observable in the south Adriatic cities, such as Dyrrachium, Buthrotum, and Lissus, which also went through the same process, but were not fully abandoned.⁵

It is difficult to ascertain the role that the Byzantine Empire played in the eastern Adriatic in the period after Heraclius and before the conflicts with the Carolingian Empire in the late 8th/early 9th centuries, mostly due to a lack of evidence in the Byzantine written sources. The Byzantines needed to maintain control over the Dalmatian islands in order to keep maritime links with the Exarchate in Ravenna open.⁶ The ‘archons of the Westerners’ which were mentioned by Theophanes in relation to the events from 717 and 718 might be a rare reference to the

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